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A Staunch Ally in the South Pacific

While the Soviets have kept up their remorseless pressures from Afghanistan to Latin America, they have also not been idle in the vast reaches of the South Pacific. Fortunately, the Free World's flank in this strategic region is protected by one of the United States' staunchest and quietest allies—New Zealand.

New Zealanders have made it their business to keep the Soviets out, and so far they have succeeded—no small feat for a nation of 3 million isolated from its powerful allies.

My associate Dale Van Atta went to New Zealand to interview the outspoken prime minister, Robert D. Muldoon, and the chief of the Security Intelligence Service, Richard Molineaux. I have also had access to top-secret U.S. intelligence reports on the low-key power struggle between New Zealand and the Soviet Union in the South Pacific.

Muldoon said that, because of the limitations of its size, New Zealand works most effectively through the 13-member South Pacific Forum that covers the vast expanse from the Equator to the South Pole and Papua New Guinea on the west to

the Cook Islands on the east.

If New Zealand has one primary aim, "it's to see that the Soviet Union doesn't get a land-based presence in that area through some kind of association with one of the independent states." New Zealand targets 70 percent of its foreign aid to the independent island groups. "As long as we keep the forum cohesive," he said, "then none of these independent states is likely to become a satellite of the Soviet Union."

Several years ago, Muldoon said, the Soviets made a major effort to "get alongside one of the governments in the South Pacific, but without success." Currently, he said, two new governments—in the Solomon Islands and Vanuatu (formerly the New Hebrides)—"are a little bit tentative."

But Muldoon added: "I'm not greatly concerned about it, because the forum now has a cohesiveness of its own."

In fact, the Russians suffered some embarrassing rebuffs in the region when they proffered development aid to some of the island groups. Most humiliating of all has been the refusal by the 11 independent island groups to

allow the Soviets to establish resident embassies in their territory.

As for New Zealand itself, the Soviets have been making a classic unsubtle attempt at subversion through the labor unions. They have made some strides: members of the Soviet-oriented Socialist Unity Party have gained leadership positions in some unions.

CIA sources said the New Zealand intelligence service is extremely capable for its size. And a number of top-secret U.S. documents show by their distribution list that they are shared with New Zealand on a routine basis.

The Pentagon also considers New Zealand a first-rate ally, and depends on its modest military force in future emergencies. The importance of a dependable ally in the South Pacific is underlined by the fact that the United States has reduced its own strength in the region to respond to emergencies elsewhere, particularly in the Persian Gulf.

Close ties between the United States and New Zealand are likely to continue, according to intelligence reports, especially with Muldoon in power.

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